

Hauling Horses Is Real Pleasure When Alternative Is Feeding Stock

By Monte Noelke

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MERTZON — By far the best winter duty on this outfit is the chance to take the boss' horse hauling rig and deliver or reclaim one of his mounts to or from what happens to be the currently fashionable spot for ailing equines. This is true even when you consider that the transporting of horses for your master may be compared to the freighting of rare art treasures; if you should bruise, scratch or otherwise blemish the priceless cargo, you'd better be able to count on a rich endowment from some rich relative, or at least a budding friendship with a wealthy widow.

It was my good fortune, recently, to draw one of these jobs. I was to check a couple of mares out of a noted veterinarian's horse hospital and bring them home to less expensive surroundings.

The timing for the trip was excellent. The north wind was whipping across the shortgrass country at 20 miles per hour; the thermometer was resting at 18 degrees. All in all, it was a perfect day to ride in a station wagon or read Jack London's stories of Yukon winters by a well-stoked fireplace.

Other factors favored traveling. This is the season of the year when the roadside scenery in this arid land is studded with such inspiring sights as the glow of prickly pear burns, the noble stockman feeding his icy-backed, frosty-snouted charges, and the spectacle of gaunt animals forming fascinating geometric patterns around the feed grounds.

Although such bleak pastoral scenes can continue into the well-thawed month of July, they seem to have deeper meaning in January and February than in other periods. Countless times, I have participated in these unforgettable panoramas, yet the sight of a stooped rancher adorned in a yellow sheen of cottonseed meal, feeding his flock, never ceases to bring a thrill.

While it is my understanding that outlanders are frequently struck speechless at the kindly sight. It is also reported that seasoned livestock bankers are often so emotionally affected at seeing feed hitting the frozen ground that they break into tears. The latter in itself is a sufficiently rare phenomena to excite hopeful expectations in the ranch country traveler.

Well, this jaunt of mine was not disappointing. The shortgrass ranchers were out in abundance. Because of the stiff breeze, the open range feedlot operators appeared to be taking an especially determined stance in the gusts. I got the impression that the past few decades of battling the elements have resulted in ranchers developing a posture similar to that taken by ancient mariners as they rode storm-swept decks of clipper ships. Other than this, my trip was little different from what occurred in the days of mule-drawn wagons and is being continued now by octane-powered vehicles.

However, during the journey a question arose and plagued me throughout the trek. I began to wonder why some of us are led out to this dry old country to follow such a prosaic routine as feeding and tending livestock, whereas more fortunate men are barely weaned from their mothers' breasts before charging off to a life of interesting adventure.

The discomfiture of my perplexity continued until I had returned to the ranch. Then I recalled an old saying of Henry the Eighth (or could it have been Henry of Orange?), who used these words to pacify his servants when they were pestering him with some silly request such as an extra chunk of fat for their soup, or a spool of thread with which to patch their jeans"

" 'Tis the sad truth the whole world over, there are those destined to place polished boots on brass rails and in silver-plated stirrups; and those whose fate it is to polish the same."